

# **REDUCING FIRE DEATHS IN VERMONT THROUGH PUBLIC EDUCATION**

Executive Planning

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## ABSTRACT

This applied research project was undertaken to study the problem of increased fire deaths in Vermont. The area of primary interest was fire deaths in single family homes. These deaths account for at least seventy percent of annual fire deaths in Vermont. This research project used the action research methodology. The results of this study will hopefully be translated to action.

The purpose of this research project was to look at public fire safety education as the method to reach people living in single family homes. In Vermont single family homes are not subject to fire prevention and building codes at the state and local level. It was found that the best way to reach this group is through additional public fire safety education.

The questions asked in this research project included: How many people died in fires in Vermont in 1997? What has the trend in fire deaths in Vermont been over the last fifteen years? What are some reasons for the high number of fire deaths in Vermont? What is the State of Vermont doing to reduce fire deaths? What is the fire service in Vermont doing to reduce fire deaths? What are some of the barriers to further reduction of fire

deaths through public education? What resources might help overcome these barriers?

The procedures used in the applied research project include a literature review, interviews with fire service leaders, and application of personal knowledge.

The results of this applied research project included confirmation of the fact that most people are dying from fire live in single family homes in Vermont. Single family homes in Vermont are the least regulated occupancies. Public fire safety education resources are limited and have been reduced due to budget problems. It was also confirmed that a lack of understanding of the fire problem by political leaders and the value of public education by some fire service leaders are significant barriers to greater efforts.

The results also confirmed that Vermont is not unique to the problem of fire deaths in single family homes, nor is it unique when it comes to barriers to public education. The results lead to the following recommendations.

It is recommended that a fire safety education summit be called and that the audience should include state, county and local fire service leaders. This summit should address the barriers to public education and how

to overcome them. It is recommended that the fire service support an initiative before the legislature to provide \$125,000 for grants to local fire departments to provide more public education. It is further recommended that a resource library be created and maintained to include public fire safety education materials that can be loaned to local fire departments and other public fire education personnel.

The last major recommendation is to create four positions at the state level, within the Fire Prevention Division to facilitate public fire safety educators in the four regions of the state. These people would work with local public educators to get the messages out. They would train the trainers and be a catalyst for resource acquisition and sharing at the regional level. They would also be a local point of contact for major media campaigns. They could get the word out quickly after a fire. This would result in the public seeing the tragedy of fire but get a message of how it can be prevented in the future in the same news story.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Background and Significance.....	4
Literature Review.....	7
Procedures.....	14
Results.....	15
Discussion.....	25
Recommendations.....	28
References.....	32

## INTRODUCTION

The state of Vermont has experienced an increase in fire deaths in recent years. The state of Vermont has an active fire prevention program that includes inspection, code enforcement and plans review for public buildings. The majority of fire deaths in Vermont are not happening in public buildings. They are happening in single family dwellings that are not subject to state regulation.

The Department of Labor & Industry, Fiscal Year 1999 Budget Department Strategic Overview presented some interesting statistics; "A principal goal of the Fire Prevention Division of providing safety in public buildings will be met when fire related fatalities are reduced to .8 per 100,000 of population. This number was chosen because it is slightly better than the national average. In 1997 Vermont ranked 20<sup>th</sup> nationally, with 2.9 deaths per 100,000 population. Five of the sixteen fire deaths were in public buildings. Eleven deaths were in single family homes over which the division has limited jurisdiction".(p.5) The report continues indicating that in 1991 the division established a fire safety poster contest. This program will be discussed later in this research project. In 1994 legislation was passed requiring all single family homes built or transferred to have smoke detectors. This law requires documentation to be presented at

the closing of the sale or transfer certifying compliance. There is however, little or no follow up to determine actual compliance. The only effective way to reach this at risk group may be through public fire safety education.

The problem we will address in this research project is the high number of fire deaths in single family homes in Vermont. This problem is compounded by the fact that single family, owner occupied homes are not subject to codes and standards that are applied to other public buildings in Vermont.

The Vermont Fire Prevention Division like its counterparts in many other states has seen a reduction in staff and additional responsibilities given to it. There appears to be little hope of receiving additional permanent staff in the near future. The Fire Prevention Division has always been committed to public education within budget and personnel constraints.

It is a common opinion that public fire safety education is not solely a state function. Many fire departments and fire service organizations in Vermont present public education programs. Vermont has only twelve fire departments with paid personnel. There are about 250 career firefighters in Vermont. The remaining others, nearly 6000 firefighters are involved with paid on call, or traditional volunteer fire departments.

Very few fire service leaders indicate they have the resources needed to provide sustained, effective public fire safety education campaigns.

The purpose of this project is to identify some factors that contribute to the fire death problem in Vermont, and to suggest some actions that may reduce this loss of life. It will look at what may be accomplished through enhanced public fire safety education efforts. This research project will look at some barriers to greater public fire safety education efforts in Vermont. The research project will look at some ongoing public education programs in Vermont. The research will also touch upon past public fire safety education efforts and how they were received.

The action research method has been used for this project. This project will result in recommended actions that can be taken jointly at the state and local level to promote fire safety through public education.

The research questions to be answered are:

1. How many people died in fires in Vermont during 1997?
2. What has the trend in fire deaths been over the last fifteen years in Vermont?
3. What are some reasons for the high number of fire deaths in Vermont?



4. What is the state of Vermont doing to reduce fire deaths?
5. What is the fire service in Vermont doing to reduce fire deaths?
6. What are some of the barriers to further reduction of fire deaths through public education in Vermont?
7. What might be done to overcome these barriers?

#### **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Vermont has experienced an increase in fire deaths during the last two years. This increase has occurred after a leveling and then a decline in fire deaths over the previous ten years. In 1997, sixteen people died due to fires in Vermont. This is the highest number of fire deaths since 1983 when twenty-one people lost their lives in fires. During the past five years, resources allocated to the Vermont Fire Prevention Division have been reduced. This has resulted in fewer public fire safety education programs presented by division staff.

Eight full time, permanent positions have been lost through budget reductions when the state was in a recession. The Fire Prevention Division had 44 full time employees in 1990 and has 37 today. This loss of positions has resulted in

less staff time for public education efforts. While there are budget constraints money is not the major factor now as the recession has ended and the special fund that supports the Fire Prevention Division has a surplus.

The political reality of a very popular Governor, who has drawn a line in the sand concerning the number of state employees, suggests the Fire Prevention Division will not get many additional full time personnel. Any new personnel would first be needed to handle the current workload of inspections and project review, which have priority over public education.

It is not that senior management in the Fire Prevention Division or the Department of Labor and Industry wants to see a reduction in public education efforts. The remaining staff is spread very thin between inspections and project permitting. The Fire Prevention Division has some 50,000 public buildings to inspect. New buildings are being built at a steady pace. There are thousands of buildings that have been inspected initially, but have not had follow up inspections to determine correction of violations noted.

In 1997, despite staff reductions the Fire Prevention Division was able to reach 6000 people with direct delivery of public education programs. Many more indirectly reached through press releases, radio and TV guest programs and newsletters.

One very successful program is the Vermont Fire Safety House. This is a mobile fire education unit set up like a house that local fire service organizations can use to present programs to school children. The trailer, donated by a development company and jointly operated by the Fire Prevention Division and the State Police Fire Marshals Office is a major success..

The increased number of fire deaths effects everyone in the Fire Prevention Division, firefighters and fire service leaders. Staff members know the importance of public education but they face competing priorities of inspection and project review in dealing with the fire problem.

Staff members become frustrated when they see the need for additional educational programs but additional resources do not exist to provide these programs.

In addition to reduced efforts at the state level there seems to be a decline in interest at the local level. In the 1980's there was a strong, but small group of public fire safety educators on the scene in Vermont. Their work was seen everywhere, on TV, radio, in the press and on shopping bags. Nowhere was safe from the public fire safety educators' messages.

Many of these people have moved on to other areas of interest, or have left the field due to competing interests at home, or at work.

Evidence of this trend is seen at fire and burn prevention conferences. In the late 1980's and early 1990's it was not uncommon to see over one hundred people at a public education conference. In last few years it has been difficult to get fifty. It has come to the point where the conferences are not being held at all.

This study will be limited to the impact of additional public fire safety education efforts on the fire problem in Vermont. It will not try to compare the relative importance of inspection and code enforcement versus public education as a method of reducing the loss.

This study will be of value to the Fire Prevention Division and fire service as they attempt to find ways to reduce the number of fire deaths in Vermont. The study will look at what other resources may exist such as local programs. It will look at the use of cooperative efforts between state and local organizations and, public and private agencies to meet this need. Finally, it will present some recommendations for possible action by those concerned with reducing fire losses in Vermont.

This research project can be related directly to the course material covered in Executive Planning. The research project will deal with the first component of the Strategic Planning Model. It will identify issues likely to affect the organization(s) in the future and suggest actions the organization(s) can take to effectively deal with those issues. It will also touch upon the second component of the Strategic Planning Model, setting goals in the recommendations section.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

For this research project, over 650 pages of literature were reviewed to determine the nature of the fire problem in Vermont and the nation. There is a great deal of literature on the subject of public fire safety education. Literature was studied about what is currently being done in the field of public fire safety education in Vermont and the nation. Sources included the State of Vermont Report of the Fire Marshal, Vermont Fire Prevention Division Mission Statement and annual report, fire service journals, and publications from TriData Corporation and the United States Fire Administration.

The literature review provided a great deal of information on public and fire service attitudes toward public fire safety education and fire prevention in Vermont and the nation. A common theme found in much of the literature was that of indifference, apathy and lack of understanding on the part of the public and many political leaders when it comes to the fire problem. While that does not appear to be true within the Fire Prevention Division, it may be true at higher levels within state government and the legislature.

The review also highlighted some of the positive things people within and outside the fire service are doing to change attitudes and behaviors related to the fire problem. The attitude of many people about the fire problem in the United States and Vermont might be appropriately summarized by these quotes from Overcoming Barriers to Public Education in The United States. (1987)

"The American public is not much concerned about fire safety on a day-to-day basis." "As a culture we are more likely to address an immediate problem than sit back and figure out how to prevent problems." (p. 32)

This document also speaks to the state role in public fire education. "Many state fire marshal offices, such as in Oregon, support or serve as resource sharing centers." (p. 35)

The role of state level public fire safety education programs can vary widely from state to state. In some states there is a very strong commitment and presence in the field of public fire safety education at the state level. North Carolina for example has personnel within the state Insurance Office who help promote local efforts. While in other states rivalry between state agencies such as prevention and training as to who should have responsibility for public fire safety education results in a fragmented approach. (p. 35) This document was very informative on the issue of public fire safety education.

The United States is not the only nation trying to reduce fire losses through public education. The purpose of public education is to change attitudes and behaviors. In the United States having a fire is seen by many people as an accident. There is little social stigma. In most cases we feel sorry for the person who had the fire and find ways to justify the event as an unavoidable accident. An example of different attitudes toward the fire problem can be found in International Concepts In Fire Protection, Ideas from Europe That Could Improve U.S. Fire Safety. (1982)

"In Switzerland, if you have a fire that is reported either to the fire department or an insurance company, it is usually investigated whatever the cause. A fire

caused by carelessness or negligence may be a civil offense and may result in a court fine." (p. 23)

"In Germany, if a building is damaged by fire, the local prosecutor must determine the cause. Civil penalties may be given for carelessness or negligence." (p. 23)

In The United States unless there is arson involved, a quick claim to the insurance company and an outpouring of sympathy and support for the victim is the normal outcome. In many cases, people are in some way rewarded for having a fire. Carelessness that leads up to a fire such as dumping ashes in the trash is not punished or even questioned by most people. Unless a life is lost or someone is injured the attitude is, that's why we have insurance.

One interesting fact discovered in the literature review is that in Britain, public fire safety education is targeted at premises not adequately covered by legislation. In Vermont, this would be the single family home. It is also where Vermont has the highest number of fire deaths and greatest amount property damage according to The State of Vermont, Report of The Fire Marshal (1996). (p. 7-16)

The literature review also involved looking at what public education programs are being offered around the country. Fire Service Programs Across America (1990) was studied as part of this project. This document reviewed the



fire prevention programs for 84 departments across the country. It provided examples of successful programs that can be used in whole or in part by other fire departments. Sharing of information is an important part of public fire safety education networking. If someone else has done the legwork it is not necessary to reinvent the wheel. It also provides reinforcement that others are out there doing successful public education programs.

One of the barriers to public fire safety education is how to prove it works. How do you prove nothing happened today because of what you did through education? Proving Public Education Works (1990) has a great deal of information on this issue.

"Most citizens and firefighters believe that educating the public about fire safety is one of the most important ways to reduce the fire problem. Or do they? You could not tell from looking at the allocation of resources to fire safety education within fire departments, schools, or other organizations."

The introduction to this document goes on to say that many people give lip service to public fire education but do not believe you can really reach all people. Others feel it is the foundation of fire protection. This document continues by stating there are very few

studies published that address the question of whether public fire safety education works, and what it takes to make it work. This is considered one of the major barriers to improving public fire safety education. (p. 1)

In addition to the literature primarily prepared for the U.S. Fire Administration, other literature was reviewed. The Fire Journal, published by the National Fire Protection Association is one of the major fire service publications that features information on public fire safety education. The NFPA conducted a nationwide survey to determine what people know about fire safety. James A. Grisanzio, authored the article What Do Americans Know About Fire Safety, NFPA Journal (1996). The highlights from the article include:

"Only 36 percent of people surveyed said they have an escape plan at home." "The West has the lowest fire death rate of 13 people per million." Most People feel the safest from fire in their own homes. Unfortunately 80 percent of all people who die from fire die at home." (p. 78-79)

This information is similar to information that exists in Vermont. The west having the lowest fire death rate may be attributed to the relatively new buildings in much of the west

and at least what seems to be a greater emphasis on public fire safety education by fire departments in the West.

In the article Education: Is it Your Priority, Fire Engineering (1996). Gary Reith states:

"As we in the fire service approach the year 2000, we need to keep our priorities in perspective. Educating the public should be one of those priorities." He continues: "We have only to read the newspaper to see how our current educational efforts are lacking." (p. 106)

This article also addresses taking a pro active approach to public educational efforts. It touches upon the idea that it is not someone else's job to do public education. Don't wait for the phone to ring, create opportunities to spread your message.

He ends the article with the following quote attributed to the late Archie Burt.

" There's no honor in fighting a fire that could have been prevented through education." (p. 107)

The literature review influenced the project by giving further validation to comments that the author has hears daily and observations that have been made by the author and others about the state of public fire safety education in Vermont. Clearly the issues around this topic in Vermont are the same

in other parts of the country and the world. One key issue is motivating people to do the work and to sustain that motivation. Another is providing training and resources so once motivated public educators can do what they do best, spread the message. It is also important that public educators are not bogged down in fund raising and project support. Those issues should be left up to their fire service leaders and organizations to address.

## **PROCEDURES**

This project was completed using personal interviews. with state and local officials including: Robert Howe, Director of Fire Prevention; Richard Baldwin, Chairperson of the Vermont State Firefighters' Association Public Fire Safety Education Committee; Chief Tim Perry of the Rutland Town Fire Department and President Ray Davison of the Vermont State Firefighters' Association. The interviews were conducted with persons involved in all areas of the fire service.

A review of literature about the fire problem in the United States and in Vermont including: The Report of The Vermont State Fire Marshal was conducted. Other literature on the subject of public fire safety education was also obtained and read. A review of available data was also conducted to

determine fire death trends over the last fifteen years in Vermont. Information was gathered on what public education programs are taking place in Vermont and who is presenting them. The project also identified some barriers to public education efforts in Vermont using the interview process and personal knowledge.

Questions asked in the interviews included; What public fire safety education programs are being conducted by your organization? What resources are being allocated by your organization to provide public fire safety education? What do you see as barriers to providing more public fire safety education in Vermont? What can be done to enhance our public fire safety education programs in Vermont? What should the role of the State Fire Prevention Division be in providing public fire safety education.

Limitations of this project include available literature specific to Vermont and the breadth of the issue. Every person has a different concept of what public fire safety education means. This research project is also limited to what can be done to reduce fire losses in Vermont through public education and does not address enhanced code enforcement or related issues.

## RESULTS

The people interviewed provided a good perspective on the issue of public fire safety education. The common response was that we need to do more public fire safety education to reduce the number of fires and fire deaths in Vermont. All of the people interviewed indicated public fire safety education is a valuable tool in reducing fire losses. It was also stated that there is a continuing need for more resources and coordination of efforts.

Vermont has had a number of innovative programs related to public fire safety education. Several years ago a Vermont Fire Prevention and Burn Conference was held. The conference brought together people from health care, media, education, and the fire service to discuss issues related to public fire safety education. Nationally recognized speakers on public fire safety education topics were brought in. Each conference also had motivational speakers who were there to pump up the troops. The goal of the conferences was to identify people with an interest in public education and give them the tools, skills and confidence necessary to present programs. The sharing of ideas and resources was a major theme of these conferences.

The results of these conferences are still being seen today as some participants have become leaders in the area of public fire safety education.

The research questions provided a framework to for gathering the information for this research project.

Question one: How many people died in fired in 1997?

The Vermont Fire Marshals Office operates the National Fire Incident Reporting System in Vermont. While one hundred percent of fire department in Vermont do not report, the information obtained is considered accurate as it is complied from incident reports, fire investigations, media reports and the field staff. In 1997 sixteen people died as a result of fire in Vermont.

Question two: What has the trend in fire deaths been over the last fifteen years in Vermont. The answer to this question again comes from the Vermont Fire Marshals Report. Using the seventeen years of data available, the following trend was observed. In 1980 there were fourteen fire deaths. The number of fire deaths increased in 1982 and 1983. In 1983 the highest number of fire deaths was reported in Vermont for the period we researched. That year twenty six people lost their lives due to fire. There was a gradual decline between from 1984 and 1991 in 1991 the lowest number of fire deaths was reported with only three being reported. The trend turned

upward again with a peak in 1994 with fifteen fire deaths and peaked again in 1997 with seventeen. Please see Table # 1 for fire death data.

One trend in fire deaths in Vermont has remained nearly the same. Most fire deaths occur in one and two family homes. This is where there are few code requirements. Also the State Fire Prevention Division has no jurisdiction with respect to fire code enforcement in single family, owner occupied homes. The only effective way to reach this population may be through public fire safety education.

Question three: What are some reasons for the high number of fire deaths in Vermont? The Report of The State Fire Marshal gives information on fire causes but not the underlying reasons for the fires. One must look deeper than the statistics on fire causes. Vermont is a small state with a primarily rural population. Many homes and buildings are of older construction.

Fires caused by electrical and heating systems are common. Vermonters also have a reputation for being independent. Many people don't like to be told what to do, or how to live. Getting the public fire safety message to people can be difficult as it is difficult to get people together in large numbers.



There are economic factors at work also. Vermont has a large population of working poor and people who depend on the welfare system for support. In some cases there really is not money to buy smoke detectors. People are having a difficult time keeping the house and putting food on the table. Vermont has had smoke detector give away programs for elderly and low income residents. This type of program also requires material and personnel resources.

Question four: What is the State of Vermont doing to reduce fire deaths. The State of Vermont has an active Fire Prevention Division that does project review for code compliance prior to buildings being constructed or renovated. The Fire Prevention Division also does inspections of public buildings for code compliance where the buildings are considered high risk such as apartments, hospitals, nursing homes, places of assembly, schools and prisons. The Fire Prevention Division also responds to complaints and does code enforcement inspections requiring correction of violations. The Fire Prevention Division also is responsible for review and enforcement of Handicapped Access rules and regulations.

In 1996 the Fire Prevention Division conducted 2000 plan reviews, 3500 fire inspections, 5400 electrical inspections and 2900 boiler inspections. The division also reached over people with direct delivery of public fire safety education

programs by department staff. Thousands more were reached by press releases routinely sent to media and newsletters around the state.

The fire safety calendar project reached over twenty thousand school children in 1996 and has been well received in school and at home. The project has been in operation for five years and the number of calendars distributed has increased each year. In September thousands of third grade students from throughout Vermont prepare fire safety posters and submit them to the Fire Prevention Division. The posters are then judged by a panel consisting of fire service personnel, educators and state officials. Thirteen posters are selected for inclusion in the calendar and each month has a theme.

Contest winners receive recognition in a meeting with the Governor where certificates are presented, the media is present and usually a gift certificate or other reward is given. The real reward is having your poster in over twenty thousand homes and schools in Vermont.

Vermont Fire Prevention Division staff also took the lead in obtaining the Vermont Fire Safety House. This mobile training aid is a trailer set up like a home, with rooms and hazard scenarios. It can be used by public educators as a teaching prop for children from kindergarten through about fifth grade to teach fire safety behaviors. Scheduling the

Fire Safety House is coordinated by the Fire Prevention Division. Fire Prevention Division staff transport the unit to locations where local fire departments and county associations use it to present programs at schools, fairs and other events. There is a curriculum package and masters of hand out material for duplication provided to the local organizations. Local presenters are also oriented as to how to properly use the Vermont Fire Safety House prior to being allowed to use it.

Question five: What is the fire service in Vermont doing to reduce fire deaths through public education? Vermont has approximately two hundred and forty four fire departments. Of that number only twelve have any paid personnel. The remainder are volunteer and paid on call departments. Many fire departments do something for public education. In most communities this involves public education programs aimed at school children.

Some of these programs are well prepared and executed, while others involve showing the kids the fire truck and a firefighter in full protective clothing so they aren't scared if a firefighter comes to rescue them. Unfortunately many feel that by the time we come to rescue the child it may be too late.

The Vermont Fire Safety House mentioned above is used by many departments to present programs. Larger departments also

prepare press releases for the media. Many times these are prepared and sent in response to a fire situation in the community.

Fire Service Programs Across America (1990) mentioned The Burlington Vermont Fire Department program. Burlington is an all paid department and serves a community of forty thousand residents. The community has one full time public educator. Every student in kindergarten through eighth grade receives fire education according to a carefully planned approach that targets the lessons to what is most appropriate for each grade level.(p.183)

The Vermont State Firefighters' Association Public Fire Safety Education Committee is working to obtain resources for local public educators to use. They are also sponsoring training for public educators.

This committee is composed of volunteers from the fire service and the Fire Prevention Division who work together on projects that will enhance public education efforts. They receive minimal funding from the Vermont State Firefighters' Association and have received several donations to help support their mission. The committee also constructs a public education float for the annual firefighters' conference parade.

Question six: What are some barriers to further reduction of fire deaths through public education? The answers to this question ranged from the issue of time to teaching resources. In a state where firefighters are predominantly volunteer, the normal duties of a volunteer firefighter include training, equipment maintenance and fund raising to name a few. This leaves little time for public education.

In the interviews conducted for this study, a common issue was recruiting and retaining public educators. Many people develop an interest in public education, but after a few years they fade away. Many public educators possibly because of their ability to communicate well become fire service leaders. When this happens public education becomes one of many duties. All people asked feel the state and fire service can and should do more to provide public fire safety education.

The resources needed to present public education programs such as video's are in short supply. Smaller departments find it difficult to purchase pamphlets and other materials for distribution. Smaller departments surviving on ham suppers and coin drops to fund their operations find it difficult enough to keep the pumper running and the station above freezing. Yet it is in these communities where the greatest risk may exist. Some fire departments have their own library as do some county

fire associations, but there is little sharing between local organizations.

An example of this situation is illustrated by the following quote. "I can get 50 engine companies to come to my district if I need them, but I cannot borrow a copy of Countdown to Disaster (an NFPA Video). Battalion Chief, New York City. Overcoming Barriers to Public Fire Education In The United States.(P.51) This attitude is also present in rural Vermont. If one asks to borrow a tape to present a program the first question is who is going to pay for it if it is lost or broken. In some areas this is partially overcome by county fire associations maintaining a library for use by association members. The Vermont State Firefighters' Association recently started a library that is located at one of the state colleges. Public education and training tapes can be obtained through inter library loan.

The fire service is doing things to enhance public fire safety education. The question is are they doing enough of the right thing? The statistics indicate more work is needed in reaching the majority of people who live in one and two family dwellings.

Other barriers found in Vermont and the rest of the United States include fire service members and leaders who still believe public fire safety education is not an important

part of the fire service. "Prevention is not what 99 percent of firefighters sign up for. It has not been a part of the image of what a firefighter is, nor is it a heart-felt part of the job for the majority of the fire service today". Another quote by Gus Welter of the National Volunteer Fire Council. "Firefighters join to fight fires not to talk about them".

Overcoming Barriers to Public Fire Education. (p.22)

Other barriers include a lack of resources at the state level. The Vermont Fire Prevention Division is primarily funded through a special fund, supported by building construction permit fees. This fund currently has a sizable surplus, but getting authorization to spend the money on additional personnel is nearly impossible. It might be possible to use some of these funds to support local public education efforts if a strong case can be made showing the need.

The Vermont Coalition of Fire and rescue services is requesting \$125,000 from the state general fund, to enhance local public fire safety education efforts. If approved these funds would be distributed by the Fire Prevention Division to local fire departments. The funds may be used to subsidize volunteers attendance at training seminars on fire safety education and to purchase pamphlets and tapes to supplement local fire safety programs.

Question seven: What resources might overcome these barriers? Again the theme is training, personnel, and resources.

Training for public educators should be scheduled to allow the primarily volunteer audience to attend, but career personnel should not be left out. Having programs at locations convenient for those attending would also be important. If someone has to travel two or three hours to attend a class, they may not attend at all. Training needs to address the needs of the public educator. Training should also include local, state, and national presenters who can bring new ideas and motivational techniques to public educators.

The issue of personnel is a common one. Public education programs and campaigns require people. One area that was discussed during interviews and meetings is whether public educators have to be fire service personnel to do a good job. The answer seems to be no. There are many people in the community who with training and direction could be excellent public educators.

One of the most promising ideas for overcoming the barrier created by a lack of willingness by personnel in the fire service to present programs would be the use of non fire service volunteers. These volunteers could work under the direction of a fire department public educator.



## DISCUSSION

Public fire education has a proven track record of reducing fire deaths and loss. The literature review highlighted the fact that while fire safety educators can make the case to prove that public fire education works, there are many leaders with authority over fire department and state agency budgets, who do not share this view. In Vermont the Fire Prevention Division has been promoting public fire education for a number of years. It has not however been able to obtain one position dedicated to providing public education at the state level. Many fire departments in Vermont do public education. Too few have the resources do it well.

Vermont has a defined fire death problem. Many leaders say even one death due to fire is too many, yet resources are not easily obtained. Many people talk about fire prevention and public education, but few pick up the ball and run with it.

Motivation of people who might have an interest in public education may help.

Providing additional resources will make the job of the public educator easier. Providing personnel who can assist the local public educator with training and motivation may result in more programs and more people willing to do programs. Recognition of programs and the people presenting

them is also important. Too often we see the results of a poor attitude toward fire and the tragic results on the six o'clock news. Rarely do we hear about public education success stories, because nothing happened. It's not newsworthy when nothing happens.

The fire problem in Vermont was found to be not much different than the rest of the country. The greatest life and property losses are in one and two family homes. There are some regional differences with respect to fire causes, but where fire takes its toll is the same as in other parts of the country one and two family homes.

In summary there is a need for additional human resources, people to present programs. There is also an apparent need for leadership in the area of public fire safety education. There is a glaring need to educate our leaders about the importance of public fire safety education and to provide evidence that public education works. This evidence will be needed when we ask state and local legislative bodies for additional financial and personnel resources. These needs are not unique to Vermont as the findings of others indicate similar issues throughout the nation.

The implications of this on the Fire Prevention Division and the Vermont Fire Service are clear. There is a need for additional public education efforts. These efforts should be

targeted at the population at risk. Resources must be obtained to present public fire safety education to people at risk. This cannot be done by any one organization in the state, but should be done as a cooperative effort between the Fire Prevention Division, The State Firefighters' Association, local fire departments and county associations.

It appears from the information studied that the fire service should not look at this as our job entirely and should seek to build coalitions with others involved in injury prevention and with teachers, school administrators, and state and, local political leaders. Further it appears that we should first educate the fire service members, leaders and the political leaders involved in budget decisions about the fire problem.

This will help us gain access the resources needed to reach the public. Only if our leaders understand the problem will we be allocated the resources we need.

In the state of Vermont hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on public education. Very little is spent on public fire safety education. Last year sixteen of our citizens died in fires and many others were injured. Tens of millions, of dollars, of tax base were destroyed by fire and hundreds of jobs were lost. Yet some political leaders say fire prevention efforts cost jobs.

This attitude is more evidence that our message is not getting through. They just don't understand. It is the job of the fire service to educate these leaders and the public. It is not someone else's job.

In the Sunday Rutland Herald of February 1, 1998. There was an article Vermont's Historic Buildings Under Fire. In this article a prominent building owner and former Republican candidate for Governor stated after his building was gutted by fire and several businesses were destroyed " I am convert to sprinklers... Why didn't someone tell me about them sooner". More proof that we are not getting the message out or it is not being received by those who need to hear it.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The research indicated an understanding by fire service and allied professionals involved with public fire education that it is important. It was also found that resources are needed. These resources include human, financial and material resources. It was shown that public fire safety education is part of the job of the fire service. Unfortunately, there are too few of us who embrace the importance of public education as a heroic aspect of the service.

The Vermont fire service must work together with local, state and national organizations to obtain and share information about the fire problem and public education. A network of public educators must be established. Recognition must be given to public educators and their programs. A coordination of public education efforts would be of benefit, so time consuming tasks such as lesson planning are not repeated hundreds of times. This information should also be available on a public fire safety education web site.

A well stocked resource library should be available to assist public educators. This would include printed and video materials. Through the use of available information technology statistics, lesson plans and ideas could be shared quickly. Statistical information such as the latest fire death and injury reports should be available at the touch of a few keys.

State level organizations should build and maintain strong relationships with the media and disseminate public service announcements on a regular basis. Every time there is a fire the article or news story should have information on how to prevent such losses in the future. This is being done to some extent now. This could be done by both the Fire Prevention Division and The Vermont State Firefighters' Association to split the workload.

All fire service organizations should get behind the Fire and Rescue Coalition request for \$125,000 for public fire safety education. This is currently before our legislature. This can be used to get the attention of our leaders. Then a case can be made for the full time people needed to adequately address the problem. In the next legislative session Vermont fire service organizations should ask for a minimum of two and a maximum of four full time, state positions dedicated to public fire safety education. The ideal situation would be to have one full time, public fire safety education specialist in each regional office of the Fire Prevention Division.

These positions would facilitate the local delivery of public education programs. These would be resource people who would work closely with local public educators. They would also present ongoing training and resource sharing workshops for local public educators in the regional setting. This would reduce time and travel commitments for the local public educators.

The Vermont Fire and Burn Prevention Conference should be held every two years. This might allow for a greater showing. It should include national level speakers. Public educators from surrounding states should be invited to attend, participate and share ideas.

Within the next few months a fire prevention summit should be held. State, County and local fire service organizations should be invited to attend. A facilitator should be chosen who can bring the to action. A battle plan must be developed and implemented to deal with the Vermont fire death problem and public education issues of the future.

A strong case can be made that public fire safety education is the future of fire prevention. Codes and standards work well in public buildings and the commercial setting. In a land where a man's home is his castle the only hope we may have of bridging the castle walls is through a strong public fire safety education program.

To deal with the issue of fire deaths in the home. Materials and programs must be developed that will gain and hold the attention of this audience. Regular newspaper feature articles and television news features on home fire safety can be effective methods of reaching the public. Printing fire safety messages on shopping bags, public education pamphlets that can be left at the door, posters at shopping malls and fire safety literature racks in public places are all ideas for reaching the public. A speakers bureau to address social clubs would be another method of getting the word out. What is really needed is a small group of full time public education specialists to assist the local public educators.

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